

A Companion Story to "She" and "Allan Quatermain"

Continued from Preceding Page

were only able to recover it by long and elaborate search. Then, after we escaped from the reeds and swamps, we found ourselves upon stony uplands where the spoor was almost impossible to follow.

Striking their spoor again on softer ground, we followed them down across great valleys wherein trees grew sparsely, which valleys were separated from each other by ridges of high and barren land. On these belts of rocky soil our difficulties were great, but here twice we were put on the right track by more fragments from the dress of Inez.

At length we lost the spoor altogether; not a sign of it was to be found. We had no idea which way to go. All about us appeared these valleys covered with scattered bush running this way and that, so that we knew not which of them to follow or to cross. This thing seemed hopeless, for how could we expect to find a little body of men in that immensity? Hans shook his head and even the fierce and steadfast Robertson was discouraged.

I walked to the top of the rise where we were encamped, and sat down alone to think matters over. Our condition was somewhat parlous. All our beasts were now dead and had been eaten, for of late we had met with little game. The Strathmuir men, who now must carry the loads, were almost worn out and doubtless would have deserted, except for the fact that there was no place to which they could go. Even the Zulus were discouraged, and said they had come away from home across the Great River to fight, not to run about in wildernesses and starve.

Hans, however, remained cheerful, for the reason, as he remarked vacuously, that the Great Medicine was with us and that therefore, however bad things seemed to be, all in fact was well; an argument that carried no conviction to my soul.

It was one evening toward sunset that I went away thus alone. I looked about me, east and west and north. Everywhere appeared the same bushy valleys and barren rises, miles upon miles of them. I bethought me of the map that old Zikali had drawn in the ashes and remembered that it showed these valleys and rises and that beyond them there should be a great swamp, and beyond the swamp a mountain. So it seemed that we were on the right road to the home of his white Queen, if such a person existed.

But at this time I was not troubling my head about white queens. I was thinking of poor Inez. That she was alive a few days before we knew from the fragments of her dress. But where was she now? I stared about me helplessly, and

as I did so a dying ray of light from the setting sun fell upon a white patch on the crest of one of the distant land waves. It struck me that probably limestone outcropped at this spot; also that such a patch of white would be a convenient guide for any who were travelling across that sea of bush. Further, some instinct within seemed to impel me to steer for it, although I had almost made up my mind to go many points more to the east.

So, next morning I headed north by west, laying my course for that white patch, and for the first time breaking the straight line of our advance. Captain Robertson, whose temper had not been bettered by prolonged and frightful anxiety, or by his unaccustomed total abstinence, asked me rather roughly why I was altering the course.

"Look here, Captain," I answered. "If we were at sea and you did something of the sort, I should not put such a question to you, and if by any chance I did, I should not expect you to answer. Well, by your own wish I am in command here and I think that the same argument holds."

"Yes," he replied, "I suppose you have studied your chart, if there is any of this God-forsaken country, and at any rate discipline is discipline. So steam ahead and don't mind me."

The others accepted my decision without comment; most of them were so miserable that they did not care which way we went, also they were good enough to repose confidence in my judgment.

Well, we started for my white patch of stones which no one else had noticed and of which I said nothing to anyone, and reaching it by the following evening, to find, as I expected, that it was a lime outcrop.

By now we were in a poor way, for we had practically nothing left to eat, which did not tend to raise the spirits of the party. Also that lime outcrop proved to be an uninteresting spot overlooking a wide valley which seemed to suggest that there were other valleys of a similar sort beyond it, and nothing more.

Captain Robertson sat stern-faced and despondent at a distance, muttering into his beard, as had become a habit with him. Umslopogass leaned upon his axe and contemplated the heavens, also occasionally the Strathmuir men, who cowered beneath his eye. The Zulus squatted about sharing such snuff as remained to them in economic pinches. Goroko, the witch-doctor, engaged himself in consulting his "spirits" by means of bone-throwing upon the humble subject of whether or no we should succeed in killing any game for food for to-morrow, a point on which I gathered that his "spirit" was quite



"Next he staggered about, waving his hands, cursing and shouting."

uncertain. In short, the gloom was deep and universal and the sky looked as though it were going to rain.

Hans became sarcastic. Sneaking up to me in his most aggravating way, like a dog that means to steal something and cover up the theft with simulated affection, he pointed out, one by one, all the disadvantages of our present position, indicating per contra that if his advice had been followed, his conviction was that even if we had not found the man-eaters and rescued the lady called Sad-Eyes, our state would have been quite different, since he was sure that the valley which he had suggested we should follow was one full of game, inasmuch as he had seen their spoor at its entrance.

"Then why did you not say so?" I asked.

Hans sucked at his empty corn-cob pipe, which was his way of indicating that he would like me to give him some tobacco, much as a dog groans heavily under the table when he wants a bit to eat, and answered that it was not for him to point out things to one who knew everything like the great Watcher-by-Night, his honored master.

At that moment I confess that much as I was attached to him I should have liked to murder Hans, who, I felt, believing that he had

me on toast, to use a vulgar phrase, was taking advantage of my position to make a mock of me in his sly, Hottentot way.

I tried to continue to look grand, but felt that the attitude did not impress. Then I stared about me as though taking counsel with the heavens, devoutly hoping that the heavens would respond to my mute appeal. As a matter of fact they did.

"There," I said, in my most icy voice, "is my reason, Hans," and I pointed to a faint line of smoke rising against the twilight sky on the further side of the intervening valley.

"You will perceive, Hans," I added, "that those Amahagger cannibals have forgotten their caution and lit a fire yonder, which they have not done for a long time. Perhaps you would like to know why this has happened. If so I will tell you. It is because for some days past I have purposely lost their spoor, which they thought we were following, and lit fires to puzzle them. Now, thinking that they had done with us, they have become incautious and shown us where they are. That is my reason, Hans."

He heard and stared at me till I thought his little eyes were going to drop out of his head. But even in his admiration he contrived to convey an impertinence as only a native can.

place. How near or how far we were from it we could not tell, since the moon was invisible and, of course, the smoke was in the dark. Now the question was, what should we do? Obviously there would be enormous advantages in a night attack, or, at least, in locating the enemy, so that it might be carried out at dawn before he marched.

After a hurried consultation, it was agreed that Hans and I should go forward and see if we could locate the Amahagger. Robertson wished to come, too, but I pointed out that he must remain to look after his people, who, if he left them, might take the opportunity to melt away in the darkness. Also if anything happened to me it was desirable that one white man should remain to lead the party. Umslopogass, too, volunteered, but knowing his character I declined his help. To tell the truth, I was almost certain that if we came upon the man-eaters he would accomplish a fine but futile end after hacking down a number of savages, whose extinction or escape was absolutely immaterial to the rescue of Inez.

So it came about that Hans and I started alone, I, to tell the truth, not at all enjoying the job. I suppose that there lurks in my nature some of that primeval terror of the dark which must continually have haunted our remote forefathers of a hundred or a thousand generations gone and still lingers in the blood of most of us.

I think that Hans guessed my state of mind, since he suggested that he should go alone, adding, with his usual veiled rudeness, that he was quite certain that he

would do much better without me, since white men always made a noise.

"Yes," I replied, determined to give him a Roland for his Oliver. "I have no doubt you would crawl under the first bush you came across, where you would sleep till dawn, and then return and say that you could not find the Amahagger." Hans chuckled, quite appreciating the joke, and having thus mutually affronted each other we started on our quest.

To Be Continued Next Sunday.
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